

Op-Ed: What If They Threw a War and...

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As a member of the media who reported on the U.S. military in Iraq, I had numerous opportunities to measure the “gap” between the press corps and the Armed Forces. One of these came a few years ago at a grubby Italian restaurant near a military base in North Carolina, where I was having dinner with a senior Army officer that I had met in West Baghdad. We ate, talked about the war and, on the television above the bar we watched the ensuing debate concerning the grim outlook of the Iraq War. The dueling commentators on the TV screen were saying that the upcoming 2006 midterm congressional elections would doom the U.S. enterprise in Iraq. They were sure of themselves: This was unquestionably a Tet moment. What they were arguing about was my dinner companion’s war—in which he’d presided over entire villages, commanded thousands of Soldiers and, too often, lifted their remains onto helicopters. But he seemed more intrigued by his shrimp scampi. “The place they’re talking about,” he explained between bites, “I don’t even recognize it.”

I knew what would come next, and it did: his charge that the press purposefully discounted the good news from Iraq. We argued the point, my impression being that, rather than bad news, a typical day relayed hardly any news at all. Between segments about blood-pressure pills, the network newscasts offered brisk and requisite mention of the day’s war dead. The minutes they devoted to the war each month—and this was at its bloody height in 2006—amounted to roughly half the television coverage broadcast during Vietnam. Meanwhile, despite having generated essential and vivid war reporting, newspapers were quietly scaling back or shuttering their Baghdad bureaus. The number of embedded journalists covering military operations in Iraq declined from over 700 in 2003 to just 11 at one point in 2006. All of which left readers to color with their imaginations those boxes in the newspapers that tallied the casualty rolls. Or, worse, to let far-away pundits and bloggers do the coloring for them.

What if they threw a war and nobody came? Well, they did and, in Iraq, too few news outlets came. Cost, safety, lagging interest—all have been offered by way of explanation. But this much at least is evident: As a result of the news vacuum, the war amounted to little more than a Rorschach test for many opinion makers—George W. Bush’s criminal folly or, on the other side of the spectrum, a proving ground for American resolve. Iraq was something to be poll-tested, quantified, imagined. If only the Army would deploy this brigade here and that brigade there, a vocal Iraq-watcher instructed his readers, despite his acquaintance with neither here nor there. Another columnist, who nearly every week purported to describe some facet of the war in Iraq,

finally weighed in by describing a TV show he watched about the war. Still another advertised his incuriosity about the war on which he opined as if it were a virtue. “While perfectly happy to go have a look at Iraq,” the columnist assured, “I am . . . under no illusion that I shall be much the wiser for it.”

But not even 7,000 miles could have measured the distance between Iraq the abstraction and Iraq the place. The moment one passed through Iraq’s looking glass, all the predetermined conclusions, all the political certainties, all the things that Iraq came to embody in the American imagination—all of them crumbled away. They could not withstand even the smallest details, which, by themselves, revealed the most telling truths: the difference between the Iraqi side of the Baghdad airport, which decayed by the hour, and the American side, which operated with industrial efficiency; the small-arms fire of a few months earlier tapering off in one Iraqi town but picking up in another; the stench of burning trash and rubber that made the country smell like a car wreck. Bearded fanatics populated Iraq the abstraction, but Iraq the place consisted mostly of terrified women and children. For American Soldiers who knew this—and who, according to surveys by the *Military Times* and the Pew Research Center, held opinions on the war that were very different from those registered at home—the machinery of war overwhelmed the din of the partially-informed. The reverse was true at home.

The observation that American Soldiers inhabited a different world from the Iraqis around them became a numbing cliché, but it was their separation from their own society—and particularly the role that the media played in expanding that distance—that ought to have unnerved us. Not so much the demographic lottery that planted one 20-year-old in an infantry platoon and another in college; the more striking divide was one of ethos and temperament. In Iraq, the U.S. mission entailed messiness and killing. On the printed and digital page, the U.S. mission required easy certainties and narrative simplicity. This dissonance made it nearly impossible to convey one place to the other. The decision by so many news bureaus not to dispatch reporters to the battlefield only muddled the picture.

None of this is to score the media for “slanting” its news coverage or possessing an anti-war tilt. It did not. The problem was that there was so little news coverage to begin with. Regardless of cost, danger, and inconvenience, when America goes to (and stays at) war, the media has a duty at least to show up—in force, without condition, regardless of consequence, and ready to fulfill its own civic obligation: to bear witness.

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